

A Revival Whose Surface of Tundra Conceals a Volcano



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Raúl Esparza and Elizabeth Stanley in Stephen Sondheim and George Furth's musical "Company," which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theater.

•

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

Published: November 30, 2006

Fire flickers, dangerous and beckoning, beneath the frost of John Doyle's elegant, unexpectedly stirring revival of "Company," which opened last night at the Ethel Barrymore Theater. This visually severe, aurally lush reinvention of [Stephen Sondheim](#) and George Furth's era-defining musical of marriage and its discontents from 1970 is the chicest-looking production on Broadway.



From left, Elizabeth Stanley, Kelly Jeanne Grant, Angel Desai and Raúl Esparza in the revival of "Company."



Barbara Walsh plays Joanne in "Company."

One glance at the symmetry, the starkness, the midnight-black palette that dominates the stage, and you feel like putting on a sweater. It's surely no coincidence that the clear modules that serve as furniture resemble ice cubes. What could be more appropriate for a musical with a passive, willfully unengaged leading man (wearing black Armani, natch), who is almost never seen without a defensive drink in his hand?

But if Bobby the bachelor, embodied with riveting understatement by Raúl Esparza, at first comes across as a man of ice, it becomes apparent that he is in a steady state of thaw. Given the subliminal intensity that hums through Mr.

Esparza's deadpan presence, you sense that flood warnings should probably be posted.

Mr. Doyle is the inspired British director who last year gave New York the most unsettling, emotionally concentrated production on record of another Sondheim musical, the macabre "Sweeney Todd." In that show, for which Mr. Doyle won a Tony Award, the cast members doubled as musicians, a device repeated in this "Company."

This "I-am-my-own-orchestra" approach probably shouldn't be used ad infinitum. Mr. Doyle applied the same stratagem to Jerry Herman's "Mack and Mabel" in London last summer to underwhelming effect.

But there's something about Mr. Sondheim that allows Mr. Doyle to find a new clarity of feeling through melding musicians and performers. It is, after all, the person who controls the music in a Sondheim production — in which there is usually a sophistication gap between the songs and the relatively pedestrian book — who has the best chance of finding the show's elusive but resonantly human heart.

Mr. Doyle's "Company," first staged at the Cincinnati Playhouse earlier this year, isn't the unconditional triumph that his "Sweeney Todd" was, partly because the show itself is less of a fully integrated piece and partly because much of the acting is weaker. Only a few of the 14 ensemble members — playing the couples who are permanent fixtures in Bobby's life and his strictly temporary girlfriends — seem at ease dispensing Mr. Furth's brittle, uptown, shrink-shrunk dialogue.

But they all blossom as musicians and singers of wit and substance. As soloists they're more than adequate, but it's their work as a team that sounds new depths in "Company" in ways that get under your skin without your knowing it.

Mr. Doyle and his invaluable music supervisor and orchestrator, Mary-Mitchell Campbell, have shaped "Company" into a sort of oratorio for the church of the lonely. The choral passage that opens the show — a litany of variations on Robert (a.k.a. "Bobby, baby"), the name of the central character, about to celebrate his 35th birthday — is performed in near darkness a cappella, sounding like liturgical chant.

The effect is not flippant. The voices — belonging to “those good and crazy people, my married friends”— seem to echo through Bobby’s head like elements of some beautiful but arcane ritual that he can observe only from a distance. Watching is what Bobby does. His outsider’s status is confirmed with pointed eloquence when it registers that Bobby is the only person onstage who isn’t playing an instrument.

The production gets astonishingly diverse theme- and character-defining mileage out of this discrepancy. Bobby’s failure to pick up an instrument and join the band becomes a natural-born metaphor for his refusal to engage with others. Yes, he sings soulfully. But as the other cast members circle the lone Mr. Esparza, playing their instruments, it is clear they possess talents for connecting that Bobby lacks, fears and longs for.

Watching the couples carp and bicker in black-out vignettes — practicing karate, experimenting with pot, visiting a discothèque — you may wonder why Bobby would ever be envious of them (which has always been a problem with “Company”). It’s when they make music together that you understand.

Mr. Doyle’s staging repeatedly and ingeniously echoes this isolating difference. Mr. Esparza is often found climbing onto the top of a Steinway or one of those transparent cubes as others crowd him. Sometimes he stands at a skeptical, uneasy remove as different groups serenade him: the married men with the haunting “Sorry-Grateful”; three girlfriends, all playing saxophones as if they were assault weapons, in a scintillating version of “You Could Drive a Person Crazy.”

The seamlessness of these motifs lends a fresh coherence to “Company,” which was originally structured as a cabaret of urban neurosis. Stand-alone crowd pleasers like “Getting Married Today” (performed by a too-grounded-seeming Heather Laws as the skittish Amy) and “Another Hundred People” (warmly sung by Angel Desai) now blend into a general musical fabric of anxiety in search of reassurance.

Even the fabled character number, “The Ladies Who Lunch,” sung by the worldly, much-married Joanne (a fierce Barbara Walsh), feels less like a show-stopping appendage than it usually does. Instead, building to a climactic repeated note that suggests what [Edvard Munch](#)’s silent scream might sound

like, it becomes the perfect preface to Bobby's breakthrough breakdown at the end of the show.

If Ms. Walsh doesn't erase the memory of [Elaine Stritch](#), who created (and will probably always own) the part, she handles her vodka-stinger-flavored dialogue with a vintage Manhattan suaveness, which is more than can be said for many of the others.

Bruce Sabbath, though, is touching and credible as Joanne's patient husband. And Elizabeth Stanley is absolutely delicious as April, the ditzy airline stewardess, who sings "Barcelona" (the best one-night-stand song in musicals).

The sense that ambivalence and confusion are not unique to Bobby is enhanced by the cold, austere glitter of David Gallo's set and **Thomas C. Hase's superb lighting**. But it's Mr. Esparza who is the top expert on ambivalence here, giving "Company" the most compelling center it has probably ever had. In previous productions, Bobby has registered principally as a wistful window onto other lives.

But Mr. Esparza is anything but a cipher. Though his Bobby can seem as laconic and drolly unresponsive as [Bob Newhart](#), you are always aware that this is a man in pain. As anyone who saw him in "Cabaret" or "The Normal Heart" knows, Mr. Esparza is generally a pyrotechnic actor, sending sparks and smoke all over the place.

In keeping the lid on such volcanic energy, he makes Bobby's climactic explosion inevitable. Though he sings beautifully throughout — in ways that define his character's solipsism — he brings transporting ecstasy to the agony of the concluding number, in which Bobby finally joins the band of human life.

For much of Mr. Sondheim's career, directors have approached his work as if "keep your distance" were woven into the copyright. More recently, a new generation of artists have heard an altogether different directive: "Come closer." Mr. Doyle and Mr. Esparza make it clear that there are infinite rewards to be had in accepting that challenge.